

VZCZCXYZ0001
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHTU #0644/01 2441623
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 011623Z SEP 09
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6742
INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHDK/AMEMBASSY DAKAR PRIORITY 0324
RUEHSB/AMEMBASSY HARARE PRIORITY 0029
RUEHLGB/AMEMBASSY KIGALI PRIORITY 0068

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000644

SIPDIS

NEA/MAG (MHAYES), DRL
STATE ALSO FOR H
LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/29/2019
TAGS: [OREP](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: CODEL MEEKS DISCUSSES HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY
WITH SENIOR TUNISIAN OFFICIALS

REF: A. TUNIS 585
[1](#)B. STATE 87407

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Marc L. Desjardins for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) During their August 27-30 visit to Tunisia, CODEL Meeks (led by Representative Gregory Meeks (D-NY), including Representatives Mel Watt (D-NC), Jack Kingston (R-GA), Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX), and Marcia Fudge (D-OH)) discussed Tunisia's record on human rights and democracy with senior Tunisians including the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister, the Minister of International Cooperation, and a group of parliamentarians. The Tunisians generally responded with boiler plate talking points - asserting (unconvincingly) that the GOT already meets international standards on elections and freedom of expression. While the Tunisians' remarks broke no new ground, CODEL Meeks' questions were a useful reminder for the GOT that Washington remains focused on human rights and democracy in the Arab World. End Summary.

October Elections and the State of Democracy

[1](#)2. (C) Congressman Meeks and delegation members asked senior Tunisians about preparations for the October 2009 parliamentary and presidential elections. Foreign Minister Abdallah said that with twelve elections under their belt, the GOT felt relatively experienced. He said his government was organizing free and credible elections and would invite observers to watch the process and provide unlimited access to journalists.

[1](#)3. (C) Prime Minister Ghannouchi outlined the local political landscape for the delegation, explaining that Tunisia has nine legal political parties, one in power and eight in the opposition, with seven of these opposition parties represented in parliament. He noted that all the parties would participate in the legislative elections. Ghannouchi said pluralism was structural, as no party could have more than 75 percent of the seats in parliament and that the ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party would guarantee that 30 percent of its seats would be held by women. FM Abdallah, however, gave a more nuanced view of the political realities in Tunisia. He said the political situation was not "ideal" and that the GOT was trying to improve it. He said that after twenty years of reforms,

there was still really only one party in Tunisia, the RCD.

Parliamentarians Offer Unequivocal Praise for Status Quo

¶3. (SBU) CODEL Meeks also discussed the state of Tunisian democracy with the U.S. Caucus (also known as the Tunisia-United States Parliamentary Friendship Group) of the Tunisian Parliament, which was represented by seven ruling RCD members and one member of the "loyal opposition" Socialist Democratic Movement (MDS). The Caucus is led by RCD member Tijani Haddad, and the following parliamentarians joined him: Nessima Ghannouchi (RCD), Saida Agrebi (RCD), Taieb Mohsni (MDS), Mohamed Habib Thameur (RCD), Faten Ben Amor (RCD), Emna Ben Arab (RCD), and Bechir Majdoub (RCD). The group lauded President Ben Ali's recently-announced candidacy and praised him for his democratic reforms, including lowering the voting age to 18 and easing the requirements to run for office. Thameur told the delegation that pluralism was alive in the political landscape, and that three different political parties had chosen to endorse Ben Ali. Mohsni, the opposition parliamentarian, said his party chose to support Ben Ali because of his social and economic achievements, though he added they would like more seats in parliament and more media access.

Freedom of Speech and Human Rights

¶4. (C) The Congressional delegation asked their Tunisian interlocutors about the degree of freedom of expression in

the country. The Parliamentarians were quick to deny that there were any restrictions whatsoever. Tijani Haddad said Tunisians can express themselves as they want - they can read domestic and foreign newspapers freely and have access to satellite television. He noted that no newspaper had been seized by the government since Ben Ali took office. He blamed international NGOs with "agendas" for disseminating false information. Saida Agrebi concurred, contending that Tunisia was so free it hosted the World Summit for the World Information Society. She said "everybody writes, everybody chats online" and then added that there could not be complete freedom in everything because Tunisia has to guard against instability. Faten Ben Amor added that freedom of expression was a social problem, not a government one, because people choose how they want to express themselves. In his meeting with the CODEL, Foreign Minister Abdallah took a different tack, saying that in the United States, press freedom had taken years to develop, while Tunisia was at an earlier stage of development and was still building press freedom.

¶5. (C) On human rights, the Foreign Minister admitted that it was not easy to get the population to internalize the concept. He said Tunisia is working to make human rights a part of daily life, but that it was difficult to achieve 100 percent compliance. Parliamentarian Agrebi, by contrast, insisted that human rights are universal in Tunisia, and that NGOs do not necessarily have to be labeled as human rights organizations to do human rights work.

Comment

¶6. (C) The GOT's assertions that the country has an essentially fair and open democratic system and no serious human rights challenges are unconvincing, boilerplate Tunisian rhetoric and broke no new ground. However, these discussions served as a useful opportunity for the Congressional delegation to remind the GOT that the USG continues to focus on these issues. End comment.

¶7. (U) CODEL Meeks did not have the opportunity to clear this message before departing Tunisia.
DESJARDINS